

AIR COMMAND AND STAFF COLLEGE

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**MAXIMIZING US SHAPING STRATEGIES AGAINST IRAN**

By

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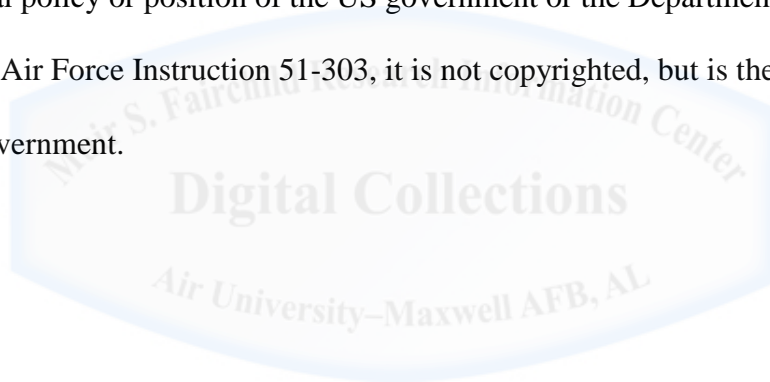
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## **Abstract**

This paper explores the current strategic and operational environment surrounding current US-Iranian relations in an effort to aid strategic and operational planning teams. The foundational premise of the paper is that the United States is missing significant opportunities to improve the bilateral relationship with Iran due to a distorted cultural view of, and often narrowly defined approach towards, Iran. The paper explores the strategic environment, providing perspectives on Iran's rationality, the regional security order of the Middle East, Iran's predominant use of the informational instrument of power, and considers the nuclear issue in context of a larger framework. I do not considered many factors that could bear on the problem—such as Israel, the Gulf Cooperation Council, and others—since there is much research already conducted in these areas and the focus of the paper is on how the United States itself relates to Iran. The paper then explores likely US and Iranian strategic end states to aid planners in order to determine positive, mutually productive areas of interest. Taking the strategic environment and mutually inclusive end-state focus areas together and filtering them through current US limitations the paper concludes that there is a need for increased non-kinetic and informational approaches towards Iran. The paper concludes by offering planning the assumptions and recommendations that result from this analysis.

## **Is the US on the Right Track?**

For over 30 years, Iran and the United States have engaged in a low-intensity conflict without significant resolution or normalization of international relations. The US strategy towards Iran is an ever-changing hybrid of containment, deterrence, and coercion, without a solid record of achieving any major goals. Antagonism was and remains the dominant characteristic of the US-Iranian governmental relationship and both side's demands focus heavily on negative objectives, rather than positive ones. With little to show in terms of progress since 1979, the questions arise: 1) is the United States addressing the right issues in relation to Iran; 2) does the United States need a fresh strategic approach; and 3) what should strategic and operational level planners know as they work to design America's approach towards Iran.

To begin answering these questions, this paper will treat the problem much like the mission analysis step found in the Department of Defense's (DoD) Joint Operational Planning Process. The fundamental beginning point is to understand the strategic guidance and determining the desired end states of the United States and Iran, and then determining where the tension lies between these two goals. The paper rejects the notion that the end states are diametrically opposed as a starting point, and instead seeks to determine where the end states have overlap as a positive method towards changing how America constructs its strategic and operational approach towards Iran. America should unfetter its policies by shifting towards positive goals such as achieving mutual interests instead of primarily negative goals such as preventing nuclear proliferation.

America's myopic focus on nuclear counter-proliferation is limiting the nation's strategic and operational flexibility and creativity when it comes to developing the lines of effort from which to deal with Iran. Furthermore, a fresh analysis of constraints that hamper or limit

America's options reveals that America cannot rely upon hard power, strong-arm methods any longer. In the end, this paper suggests a better-rounded approach, along with a host of planning assumptions to aid planners in their endeavors. By adopting positive goals informed by the strategic environment, focusing on mutually overlapping end states between the United States and Iran, and employing an increasingly soft-powered approach, America might be able to achieve more of its long-term interests and change the nature of the dialogue with Iran.

### **How We Got Here, and Where we are Going**

In 1979, the Iranian hostage crisis cemented the US view of the Iranian revolution—and the government that spurned it—as irrational and uncalculated. This one act continues to “cloud policy judgments” by the US government and its citizens.<sup>1</sup> Statements by President Ahmadinejad calling for Israel to be “wiped off the map,” easily perpetuate the antagonistic views towards Iran for the average American.<sup>2</sup> In addition, President Bush's statement in January 2002 calling Iran part of an “axis of evil” still clouds and typifies the common public discourse among Americans and their government.<sup>3</sup> Dr. Ali Mostashari, editor of *Iran Analysis Quarterly* states, “if Washington continues to use an antiquated mental map of Iran's position in the world,” the United States will find itself with few options left to deal with the nation—and those options if acted out, “would be irrational and limited.”<sup>4</sup> Political pressures, both from domestic constituencies and from allies related to Iran's pursuit of nuclear weapons could force the United States to act. If the United States must act, it should act in line with long-term end-states, and not from a position of limited or imposed choices.

Recent incidents are quickly transforming Iran into “an important focal point for US foreign policy.”<sup>5</sup> For one, the showdown at the UN in September 2012 among the United States, Israel, and Iran indicates growing tensions among these principle nations. Israel sought an

international “red line” that would ensure automatic military intervention.<sup>6</sup> President Obama continued to stress a diplomatic solution, while alluding to a time limit for International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA) inspections, beyond which military means may come into play.<sup>7</sup> Additionally, Secretary Clinton’s opening remarks at the Australian-United States Ministerial Conference in November 2012 emphasized bilateral cooperation between the two countries against Iran becoming a nuclear-armed country.<sup>8</sup> Finally, the IAEA also announced in November that Iran’s Fordow nuclear facility rapidly and without announcement ramped up its ability to enrich uranium through the addition of more centrifuges. The IAEA concluded that Iran could enrich enough uranium to achieve weaponization of a nuclear bomb in a matter of months.<sup>9</sup>

Therefore, the ensuing interagency planning will face tough choices in constructing a coherent and consistent response over the next few months and beyond. Michael Eisenstadt argues that US planners “tend to be wedded to a hard power approach” that downplays soft-power instruments by focusing on Iran’s hard-power means such as proxy terrorists, “anti-access/area-denial capabilities (small boats, mines, and anti-ship missiles) . . . and its nuclear program.”<sup>10</sup> American planners need to consider so much more.

The operational planning assumptions to shape and deter Iran require less reliance on military hard power and instead focus more on non-kinetic and informational lines of effort as the supported efforts in order to achieve US desired end states. Due to US limitations and constraints—now more than ever—a move towards the informational instrument of power (IoP), combined with *judicious* use of military means, will offer the US its best chance to achieve its long-term goals. Only by understanding the Iranian desired end state can the United States

maximize its use of non-kinetic, soft-power instruments. America can best utilize and apply these tools at the intersection of where Iranian and US end-states overlap.





## **The Strategic Environment**

The strategic environment influences how the United States should approach the situation with Iran. Whether one subscribes to a realist, liberal, or constructivist view of international relations, several basic factors underlie and formulate the bilateral relationship between states. These factors include rationality based on strategic culture and a rational-instrumental approach, the regional security order, national power capabilities and preferences, and international nuclear non-proliferation. Recognizing that these are not the only factors that shape US-Iranian relations, these are salient and suffice for this paper's scope.<sup>11</sup> The next paragraph briefly introduces each factor, followed by a more robust expansion in sections below, of each factor's bearing to the problem at hand. Those factors are rationality, regional power relationships, IoP preferences and capabilities, and nuclear proliferation.

Mostashari argues that a determination of Iran's rationality "may prove crucial in shaping US foreign policy . . . prompting a different approach."<sup>12</sup> To this end, a rational-instrumental model approach that considers culturally informed preferences—that is, calculations—of the relative value of gains, risks, and costs comparison is helpful to the discussion. In addition, emerging regional powers are driving international affairs to a more regionally based approach that de-emphasizes bilateral solutions alone in favor of a regional cooperation methodology.<sup>13</sup> Of equal importance, America must assess Iran's IoPs in order to counter Iran with effective symmetric and asymmetric solutions. Finally, the United States must comprehend the proper relationship that nuclear proliferation has in the bigger picture in regard to the American desired end states with Iran. The paper discusses each of these factors in more detail below.

## **Rational Actor? Strategic Culture, Ideology, and Factionalism**

The first question to answer concerning Iran is its rationality. While it is important to assess and understand characteristics of Iran's population and political culture in state-to-state dialogue, ultimately the current heads of state and the governments they run determine the character of the relationship. Diplomacy is a matter of interaction between the leaders and governments of Iran and the United States. Therein lays the question of rationality: Are Iran's key leaders rational actors? If not, policy and IoP choices become quickly limited. Examples of behavior that make Americans question Iran's rationality include President Ahmadinejad's statements against Israel's right to exist, supporting Hezbollah and Hamas to undermine the peace process in the Middle East, pursuing nuclear technology that could possibly be used for a weapon, assassinating dissidents at home and abroad, and helping insurgents in Iraq and Afghanistan.<sup>14</sup> However, Eisenstadt argues that due to strategic culture, these examples actually demonstrate Iran's rationality.<sup>15</sup> Only by considering the strategic culture, can acts that appear irrational take shape and form into rational-instrumentalist choices.

Therefore, Iran is a rational actor on the regional and world stage when one considers the strategic culture, the ideological foundations of the 1979 revolution, and Iranian actions since the death of the revolutionary founder Ayatollah Khomeini. This paper will not delve into an in-depth study of Iran's strategic culture due to plenty of scholarly research already done in this area. Yet, a summary is helpful. Jeannie Johnson argues that, "rational behavior is culturally dependent" and the "values used" to determine cost versus benefits of an action are dependent upon the "actor's preferences."<sup>16</sup> She concludes that a combination of culture, government processes, and public and private organizational cultures shape each country's strategic culture.<sup>17</sup> A realist might argue that Iran as a state is simply looking to gain power, but a more nuanced

approach through strategic culture analysis notes the strong influence of the ideology that spurred the 1979 revolution, which shapes Iran's foreign policy even today. This explains why Iranian behaviors that appear irrational to the United States represent rational goal seeking from the Iranian perspective.

The ideology of the Iranian revolution, rooted in Shiite Islamism, and shaped by Persian identity, often conflicts with the day-to-day demands of governing a nation-state in a larger world. The leader who took power through the revolution created a theocratic government whose actions appear irrational to Americans, yet former CIA Jeannie Johnson argues those actions reflect a government having “diverse goals based on a normative understand[ing] of who they are and what role they should be playing.”<sup>18</sup> Khomeini sought a “revolution without borders,” and sought the export of the revolution, which often manifests itself in militant ways that are counter to the United States strategic culture.<sup>19</sup> Yet, as Council on Foreign Relations fellow Ray Takeyh notes in his book *Guardians of the Revolution*, “no country can persist on ideology alone,” and with the passing of Khomeini in 1989, the new leaders had to decide if Iran would “remain a revolutionary state or become just another imperial power.”<sup>20</sup>

The turning points of Khomeini's death, the end of the Iran-Iraq War, and Ayatollah Khamenei's assumption of power as Supreme Leader brought about new requirements and a new reality for Iran. Takeyh goes on to state, “what emerged is factionalism,” characterized by internal dissention and loosening of cohesion within the Iranian government and the people of Iran.<sup>21</sup> In place of cohesion, an “uneasy balance between ideological compunctions and pragmatic designs would come to define Iran's international perspective.” The reality of needing to engineer a robust economy to rebuild the nation after eight years of war meant a more open and engaged Iran in relation to the emerging globalized markets. At the same time, Khomeini's

direct, overpowering influence was gone, but his influence lived on. Iran's foreign policy is now a blend of ideology and pragmatism.

Takeyh notes that Iran's ideological pull sometimes "obstructs Tehran's path towards realism," "yield(s) too easily to terrorism as an expression of policy", and challenges the "Gulf sheikdoms."<sup>22</sup> By understanding the Iran's tension between ideology and pragmatism, America can conclude that Iran acts rationally based on strategic culture. Examples of Iran's capacity to act rational include (but is not limited to) seeking to mend fences with the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) and European Union and building economic relationships with China. The implication of Iran's rationality is that the United States must mold its foreign policy approach in a way that treats Iran as rational. Besides rationality in terms of strategic culture, the nature of the Middle East region and Iran's role in the regional weighs equally in shaping US policies.

### **Regional Relationships: A Multi-Polar, Strength-Based Order**

The increasing influence of regional powers on the international order is a relatively recent development. The emergence of countries such as Brazil, Russia, India, China, and South Africa (BRICS) exemplify this change. American policy makers now have to formulate policies taking into account the new multi-polar—or even non-polar—international environment for American policy makers.<sup>23</sup> Regional powers and the security orders of each region influence international relations.<sup>24</sup> Given America's still significant global sway, it has interests in each of the major regions; therefore, America's policy approaches must work with and through each region's structure.

According to Stewart-Ingersoll and Frazier, the Middle East (ME) is a multipolar region with Iran, Turkey, and Saudi Arabia constituting the poles. They base this conclusion by analyzing the nation's population, gross domestic product, and military spending, and leave

Israel and Egypt out of the equation due to the overall “balance of material capabilities.”<sup>25</sup> Iran attempts to cast itself as the protector of the region by defending against US influence and the perceived threats to Islam itself.<sup>26</sup> Saudi Arabia has had a more positive, intermediary role, and Turkey seems to straddle the divide, at least before the Justice and Development Party (Adalet ve Kalkınma Partisi or “AKP” in Turkish) came to dominate Turkish national elections starting in 2007 and increasing even further in 2011.<sup>27</sup> Since then, Turkey appears much more militant and strident in its quest for power and influence in the region.

Egypt’s recent political changes could change its status as a pole in the ME. The implications of the Muslim Brotherhood’s rise to power are still being determined, especially as grass roots demonstrators maintain pressure for increased freedoms. Additionally, Iran is reaching out to Egypt in ways not seen during the Mubarak years, perhaps due in part to the theocratic similarities to Iran’s revolution and now Egypt’s. These issues together create uncertainty and ambiguity as to Egypt’s future role within the ME as the poles vie for power.

Relations among states in the ME reflect a strength-based security order “primarily through the use of material power-based strategies that seek to deter or confront security problems through the deployment of conventional power capabilities.”<sup>28</sup> The region does not have a hegemonic state, nor do the strongest states (mentioned above) act in concert to meet regional security issues; therefore, a hegemony-based and concert-based order is rejected, though a concert-based order could develop in the future. Iran demonstrates some attempts to “generate a shared set of interests, values, and identity” in the region, such as state-to-state visits recently with Egypt as mentioned above.<sup>29</sup> Additionally, states in the region use many international bodies such as OPEC and GCC as mechanisms for cooperation, but not to the extent required to make the leap from strength-based to concert-based order. Therefore, the ME represents a multi-

polar, strength-based region with Iran attempting to utilize a few concert-based security strategies, such as promoting anti-Israeli and anti-American sentiment to claim the title as the defender of the Islamic world. US planners must pay particular attention to Iran's use of the information IoP as its primary way to gain its security and influence.<sup>30</sup>

### **Iran's Use of National Power Instruments**

While seeking ultimate military power projection through nuclear weapons, Iran's leaders use the other IoPs because Iran lacks significant conventional military capabilities for projecting power. While constrained economically for several reasons, Iran offers economic incentives—such as oil exports to nations such as China—while seeking to build consensus among other like-minded oil-producing countries, such as Venezuela.<sup>31</sup> Additionally, Iran engages in diplomatic maneuvering through the Non-Aligned Movement, which it chaired through 2012, garnering recognition and praise by leaders of the United Nations.<sup>32</sup> Yet Iran uses information as its most formidable weapons while it works to obtain a nuclear deterrent capability.<sup>33</sup>

Having determined that Iran is a rational, though aggressive and radical actor, the Islamic Republic of Iran (IRI) calculates the “probability of success compared to the value of prospective gains and the cost of failure for any particular decision.”<sup>34</sup> Applying a rational-instrumental approach to IRI leadership, Iran's seeks to use information to win the battle for relationships and ideas in the region, to the detriment of the United States and the other regional poles mentioned above.

This approach represents a low cost, moderate risk, high reward strategy for Iran. The aggressive information campaign may provoke an attack by foes; however, the international community would likely see that course of action as an overreaction. In addition to the purely economic cost of this campaign, one must add the potential loss of domestic support and

legitimacy. For instance, the green movement's slogan of "No Gaza, No Lebanon, I sacrifice my life for Iran" represented "an assault on an ideological pillar of a political system that claims to champion the Palestinian cause while oppressing its own population."<sup>35</sup>

Iran seeks to create an atmosphere of continued resistance and martyrdom in order to energize and strengthen its society and that of the ME through conflict in order to diminish US influence in the region.<sup>36</sup> Specifically, Eisenstadt states, Iran's leaders employ "propaganda and psychological warfare" as "their decisive line of operations."<sup>37</sup> Additionally, he argues, "whereas the United States undertakes information operations to support military activities, Iran frequently undertakes military activities to support its information operations."<sup>38</sup> The most recent example of this includes Hamas' attacks on Israel in November 2012 where Iran used the cessation of hostilities to tout Hamas' victory due to Iran's assistance.<sup>39</sup> To have attacked and stared down Israel without a suffering ground attack from Israel enabled Iran to meet its objectives of winning the information campaign and endearing itself to Arabs across the ME.

Another way Iran uses the informational IoP is through "reputation and image management," by describing itself as a "dependable partner and dangerous adversary . . . push[ing] for a triumphalist narrative."<sup>40</sup> It also spends significant capital to support clerics and Additionally, Iran seeks to influence information exchange. The US administration describes Iranian jamming efforts to limit the exchange of ideas and information that undermines Iran's reputation, while spreading its own ideology and propaganda.

Iran jams or interferes with foreign broadcasts from around the world, misusing satellite equipment to simultaneously block dozens of channels on international satellites. Recently, Iran helped Syria jam Al-Jazeera's coverage of protests and the Syrian regime's bloody crackdown. Ironically, Iran uses the same satellites and frequencies to broadcast its own news and ideology worldwide, in more than 10 languages and on more than 25 channels.<sup>41</sup>

In conclusion, Iran's information operations play a vital role in its efforts to gain strength in the region and exert its national will in relation to other regional actors, especially the United States. These operations help Iran delay and avoid accountability for its behavior while it works to gain greater hard power through nuclear weapons.<sup>42</sup>

### **Nuclear Proliferation: The Big Picture in Relation to US Engagement**

Nuclear proliferation and Iran's acquisition of nuclear weapons overshadow all other aspects of US-Iranian relations. Yet, US-Iranian interests intersect in many other areas. A stable Iraq and Afghanistan, economic vitality, and drug trafficking are just a few of the areas where the United States and Iran could work together. Immediately following 9/11, Iran worked hand-in-hand with the United States during meetings in Bonn, Germany to build plans for the invasion of Afghanistan, with Iran giving over-flight privileges for the United States.<sup>43</sup> In 1998, the "Dialogue of Civilizations" showed that Iran and the US could build foundational elements required to open communication and dialogue.<sup>44</sup> These types of overtures and openness have been missing during the last decade, ever since Iran was lumped into the "axis of evil," so nuclear proliferation issues now dominate the discussion. America has collaborated with Pakistan, which developed nuclear technology and weapons outside the NPT, and North Korea's successful extraction of resource coupled with nuclear appear to keep America at bay. The inconsistency shown by these types of action creates confusion in Iran's calculations regarding the acquisition of nuclear technology.

The current Iranian regime views nuclear weapons through the lens of the Iran-Iraq War, since many of them had served on the front lines. The commander of the Revolutionary Guards at the time concluded that a successful prosecution of the war would require nuclear weapons because Iraq had used chemical weapons against Iran first. Since the United States refused to



stop Saddam's use of chemical weapons (and even went so far as to provide satellite intelligence at the same time), Iranian leaders determined that they should gain these capabilities for themselves as both offensive and defensive weapons.<sup>45</sup>

This raises the issue regarding today's US-Iranian relationship—namely, that there is great suspicion that Iran would use nuclear weapons as an offensive tool. Remarks by government leaders constantly give the United States concern that the IRI views nuclear weapons as tools to other ends beyond just deterrence. Most notably, Iran's proxy war with Israel and the fear that Iran will use the weapons against Israel offensively or in a potential terrorist attack against America or its interests.<sup>46</sup> If the United States did not think Iran would use nuclear technology irresponsibly (that is, offensively), the issue of nuclear technology would be far less threatening. In sum, the technology itself does not create the dilemma, but fear rises due to the "lack of confidence and trust of the current [Iranian] regime to limit the technology's use to peaceful purposes."<sup>47</sup> Therefore, if the US and Iran could come to an agreement regarding this fundamental issue, the nuclear technology crisis would diminish in its intensity, and the whole gamut of diplomatic relations between the two states would become viable. Moderate conservative leaders in Iran appear willing to tackle this subject. If the United States can shame the militant factions inside Iran on the international stage and ensure US actions do not undermine the efforts of Iranian moderates—then both nations might step closer to achieving their goals.<sup>48</sup>

## **End States**

Starting with the end in mind is critical to achieving success in any endeavor, and it is no different for nation states. Any two nations at odds with one another have competing end states, and the determination of those end states will provide insight into courses of action that can solve the problem of getting to one's goals while actively opposed by a thinking opponent with its own divergent purpose.<sup>49</sup>

### **US End State**

The United States 2010 National Security Strategy (NSS) lays out the underlying themes that drive American interests and what it wants to achieve both in general and in specifics concerning Iran. First, President Obama states, "there is no greater threat to the American people than weapons of mass destruction, particularly the danger posed by the pursuit of nuclear weapons by violent extremists and their proliferation to additional states."<sup>50</sup> Iran fits this category, especially as it is a nexus of state-sponsored terrorism. Second, the US is seeking to uphold the Non-Proliferation Treaty (NP) by holding Iran accountable for its failure to meet its "international obligations."<sup>51</sup> Additionally, the NSS explicitly states, America "will . . . work to prevent Iran from developing a nuclear weapon."<sup>52</sup> To gain security and stability in the Middle East, America seeks "the transformation of Iranian policy away from its pursuit of nuclear weapons, support for terrorism, and threats against its neighbors."<sup>53</sup> Next, the strategy indicates that the US goal is to "promote a responsible Iran" that takes international treaties and stability seriously as a full-fledged member in the "community of nations." The NSS explicitly threatens further isolation if the regime fails to do this. Finally, the NSS acknowledges that past US refusal to engage Iran has not produced a less threatening Iran.<sup>54</sup> While the NSS serves as the ultimate guide to US strategic thought, other documents provide insight as well.

Supporting documents that nest with or under the NSS focus these goals even further. The *Counterterrorism Strategy of the United States* highlights only two countries as active sponsors of terrorism, and Iran is one of them. The United States is opposed to Iran as a state-sponsor of terrorism and used the terrorist attacks Iran supports in order to “undermine regional stability.”<sup>55</sup> The Department of Defense, through the *Quadrennial Defense Review*, highlights Iran as the key actor in a “strategically important region,” and the desire for America to prevent conflict there.<sup>56</sup> This particular emphasis indicates that shaping and deterring efforts are critical in the Middle East, against Iran particularly, unlike any other region in the world save maybe North Korea; statements by US leadership confirm this reality.

Finally, recent speeches by principle US government officials add another layer of detail that helps reveal US intentions and desires about Iran. Two particular instances are telling. On November 14, 2012, Secretary of State Clinton attended a bilateral ministerial meeting between the US and Australia. She emphasized Iran as a common strategic threat in her opening remarks: “Australia’s membership on the [UN] Security Council will be essential, for example on Iran, where the international community remains firm and united in our efforts to prevent Tehran from acquiring nuclear weapons.” A month later, President Obama, while addressing the United Nations commented, “just as [Iran] restricts the rights of its own people, the Iranian government props up a dictator in Damascus and supports terrorist groups abroad. Time and again, it has failed to take the opportunity to demonstrate that its nuclear program is peaceful, and to meet its obligations to the United Nations.”<sup>57</sup>

Synthesis of the above statements enables a more simplified rendering of a US end state that revolves around concepts such as non-threatening postures towards neighbors, renouncing terrorism, and developing nuclear technology responsibly. Therefore, the US end state

concerning Iran is as follows: *A responsible, strong Iran as one of many regional powers (to include the US) who respects state integrity, is self-sustaining through integration in the globalized economy and its own resources, and does not support terrorism.* This is only half the equation when it comes to analyzing the strategic environment, and Iran has a vote as well.

### **Iran's End State**

Juxtaposed against the US end state is the proposed Iranian end state: *To become the dominant regional power free from strong US influence, with the economic and military power capabilities to promote a universal Islamic government across the Middle East, fashioned after its own revolution and government.* Since direct access to Iranian strategic thought is less abundant, assessments by Iranian experts and IRI statements or actions provide a window into why the above end state is valid.

Iran seeks hegemony in the ME and a hegemonic security order. While this does not preclude US trans-regional influence, Iran desires to diminish US influence to a negligible amount. Iran's view of itself from a strategic and historical point of view includes a sense of greatness and superiority in relation to other states in the region, along with an ever-present concern for foreigner meddling. A presumption of greatness, an undiminished sense of superiority over its neighbors, and an acute concern about foreigners' intentions historically shapes Iran's international orientation. Takeyh claims, that as a Persian-Shiite nation struggling in an Arab-Sunni Middle East, potentially hostile foes surround Iran.<sup>58</sup> He goes on to argue that given US toppling of "Iran's historic enemies in Afghanistan and Iraq, as well as the decline of America's influence over time," Iranian leadership feels the time is ripe for Iran to "claim the mantle of regional leadership."<sup>59</sup> To do so requires the revolutionary government to remain in place.

Iran is equally seeking to ensure government survival, as fashioned from the 1979 Revolution. Given their Islamic commitments and the ardent sense of nationalism, Iran believes the Islamic Republic has a right—and indeed an obligation—to emerge as the leading power of the Middle East.<sup>60</sup> Several factors are contributing to Iran’s “confidence and clout in the region.”<sup>61</sup> Rising energy prices, the removal of Sunni counterweight Saddam Hussein and the Taliban, Hamas and Hezbollah successes, and American stumbling in Iraq and Afghanistan has emboldened Iran to “unabashedly reassert itself on the international stage.”<sup>62</sup>

Finally, Iran wants to export the revolution, becoming the model for an Islamist government across the entire region and beyond if able. The Iranian Revolution, in essence, sought to transform Iran toward the righteousness of Islam, which naturally leads to ambition to project power to transform the entire ME. Before his ouster, President Mubarak of Egypt commented that “the Arab Shia population is more loyal to Iran than to the country they live in,” indicating concern for the rising tide of Shia activism and challenges to Sunni Arab rule that Iran is fermenting as the spiritual center of Shia Muslims.<sup>63</sup> Additionally, the political far right coalition in Iran thinks the region is currently experiencing a swell of power in those Middle Eastern countries that historically oppose America. Furthermore, that rise in power of Islamist forces naturally reduces America’s influence. In Iran’s eyes, its spiritual power (e.g. informational power) is successfully confronting America’s historical interests in the region.<sup>64</sup>

## **Forming a Strategy**

An understanding of US and Iranian strategic end states does not provide the whole foundation to form a strategy. Taken together, ends, ways and means forms a national strategy and requires a whole-of-government approach utilizing all IoPs. As noted, Iran relies heavily on the informational IoP, while the United States traditionally has relied on the military instrument. A full discussion of ways and means is beyond the scope of this paper; however, to maximize the use of selected ways and means, it is best to employ them at areas that can create the most effect towards our own end state. To be clear, the United States should focus its efforts on areas of mutual interests and ambitions that are in alignment with Iranian goals. These positive goals provide a starting point—to gain a foothold at a minimum—towards US ends. In addition, this approach prevents planners and policy makers from focusing on narrow, single subject issues that could hinder real opportunities. A focus on negative objectives can cause second and third order effects that have unintended, but real negative consequences, and hamper higher objectives.

Consequently, the end states goals that do not overlap will meet greater resistance and require more US capital to achieve. By examining where the end states and the current US limitations, positive new options become available for how to proceed based on the overall strategic environment.

### **Where End States Converge**

By depicting the two end states in a Venn diagram, the question becomes where, if at all, do the two circles overlap in mutual agreement. See Appendix A. Given that two states have elements of their respective end states that cannot match explicitly, the essence or sentiment of

the end state must be determined. It is easier to start by separating out those concepts that are mutually exclusive to render the remaining concepts for consideration.

Comparing the two end states, a few key areas stand out that are mutually exclusive. From the Iranian perspective, the US desire to remain highly engaged in the ME is a non-starter. Additionally, Iranian rejection of state-sponsored terrorism as a tool will meet extreme resistance given its value for balancing power against Israel and America. Given Iran's historical skepticism of external actors and Western influence, planner should consider the effects of outward US hard power. (Though, as a transnational actor without real estate in the ME, it is admittedly difficult to project power without putting a very visible presence into the region. The military does accomplish this through the carrier task force and bases in and around the Arabian Sea.) Iranian moderate conservatives understand the international reality that terrorism and anti-Israeli/American rhetoric make Iran appear "unnecessarily hostile."<sup>65</sup> To avoid escalation of this security dilemma, Iran could display "moderation and self-restraint in their public declarations," and help assuage fears that Israel will be the first and immediate target when Iran achieves a nuclear capability.<sup>66</sup>

For the United States, the acceptance of Iran as the hegemon and any semblance of state-sponsored terrorism are anathema to an acceptable end state. For the next 20 years, the US will likely continue to rely on ME energy resources and desire to preserve security for allies in the region such as Israel, Jordan, and Saudi Arabia.<sup>67</sup> In addition, documents such as the NSS and others as cited above thoroughly denounce terrorism. Therefore, any form of state-sponsored terrorism raises strong opposition from the US point of view.

The US and Iranian end states merge and find similarities in a few key areas. The first similarity is the characterization of Iran's importance to the region. Both nations agree that Iran

must be a strong, economically productive country with influence throughout the region. While Iran and the US might not be in full agreement as to whether Iran should be a hegemon, the reality is that both nations see a role for a strong and prosperous Iran. Additionally, America and its leaders have said repeatedly that it is not at war with Islam and that democracy is a viable option for Islamic states. Islam and democracy are not mutually exclusive. Finally, if the right leaders emerge within Iran, and Iran becomes strong enough militarily, it might be induced to give up terrorism as an approved or supported tactic. Iran could move in that direction by clearly distinguishing between valid special operations capabilities versus sponsoring indigenous and proxy terrorist organizations. With these thoughts in mind, the proposed mutual end state is: *A strong and engaging Iran with economic and military power, combined with a peaceful, democratic Islam across the region.*

### **Strategic Limitations**

A few salient issues create significant limitations to US freedom of action across the various IoPs. First, the state of the US economy make wars of choice practically unfeasible, which is addressed more in US constraints section below. Second, China needs congenial relations with Iran due to its rising energy requirements, which makes hard-hitting UN resolutions or sanctions tough for America to achieve. The China “loop hole,” exacerbated by Russian interests’ vis-à-vis Iran, makes it difficult to achieve overwhelming effects against Iran on economic or international fronts. Next, full-scale invasion of Iran is not expected or anticipated in the near future with the US military still engaged in Afghanistan and reconstituting from Iraq. Finally, analysts estimate that air strikes against Iranian nuclear facilities would likely set back Iran’s nuclear program only a year or two.<sup>68</sup> Such strikes would likely only exacerbate



the problem by uniting the Iranian public behind the regime through nationalistic and patriotic tendencies.<sup>69</sup>

### **US Constraints and Restraints**

In addition to the strategic environment, the US faces both domestic political and objective limitations in dealing with Iran. The United States faces domestic restraints based on the strategic environment and America's democratic political culture. The United States also accepts constraints such as overtly setting regime change as a goal, not seeking preventative military intervention, and a lack of economic capability to sustain another major combat operation short of total war.

Restraints represent the demands of prudence, a recognition that an action does not serve our long-term best interests. The United States will not overtly seek regime change through military intervention because of the high political cost. Opposition from our allies and the international community in general would constitute unbearable costs, possibly including the label of an irresponsible and belligerent nation.<sup>70</sup> The United States should recognize that it lacks sufficient intelligence information to conduct an effective preemptive strike against Iran to prevent Iran from achieving a nuclear weapon. Given the intelligence failure of Iraq, public opinion and political leaders would require irrefutable proof. Some unforeseen event would have to transpire for America to react offensively with military strikes against Iran. Although politicians like to say all options are on the table, realistically analysts conclude that strikes are not a viable option without some dramatic demonstration of aggression by Iran.<sup>71</sup>

Economic conditions in the United States impose another significant constraint. Major combat operations would require a complete and full engagement by the United States along the lines of World War II. Short of that, the United States is unlikely to choose such action until its

fiscal house is in order, unless Iran presents a clear and present danger to US survival. America faces exorbitant, on-going economic commitments to Afghanistan and Iraq and must address the burgeoning federal deficit before incurring more economic damage.



## Planning Assumptions for Shaping Efforts

Ideally, the US builds the conditions required to have the maximum influence on emerging conflict before they manifest into violence. The more effective shaping efforts are, the less likely the United States will have to resort phases of a conflict that are much more constrictive and expensive.<sup>72</sup> Therefore, based on the strategic environment, proposed end states, and US limitations, the following assumptions shape the planning process and the subsequent recommendations for ways to achieve the mutually inclusive end-state.

- The US-Iranian relationship represents a contest of political will. Iran puts its main effort into informational lines, and the United States must start working to counter this strategy by making an information campaign its main effort. Accepting the well-known fact that Iran is the political (and often military) supporter of Hezbollah, the Israel-Hezbollah war of 2006 demonstrates how Iran uses military and diplomatic efforts to garner the desired informational effects. Furthermore, Iran knows that an overt aggressive military action on its part lessens the US constraint of using military power itself. Knowing this, Iran will avoid giving the US a clear moral victory in the use of hard power.
- Casualties on either side will cripple the US's information campaign. Strategic communications must work to build up the will of the American people to accept losses on both the Iranian and American sides before they happen. More importantly, the communication must emphasize why the risk to loss of life in such an endeavor is worth the cost. The starting point is human rights and aid, not against "WMD" or terrorist means. Information Operations planners must start by determining *why* they use an instrument of power, and then work back from there to determine the correct means to use.

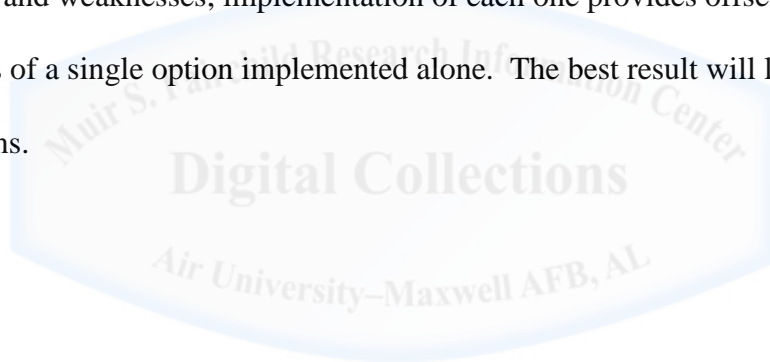
A number of NGOs and universities worked to count the collateral damage in Iraqi and Afghani lives during US combat operations. We must expect an even strong publicity campaign on the Iranian side, highlighting the suffering of every Iranian killed or injured in combat. US strategic planners could leverage the following characteristics, rather than take them as hazards/obstacles. First, there is a larger Iranian population residing in the United States than there are Iraqis or Afghans. Second, there is a much higher degree of Iranian integration into the global information environments.

Third, there are strong connections between Iranian intellectuals and government official and US universities. There are visiting scholars from Iran in many US universities. For example, Dr. Amir Akrami is working temporarily at the Eastern Mennonite University teaching religious studies.<sup>73</sup> In addition, Dr. Ali Baghaei is a visiting economics scholar at the University of Berkley, and Doctors Hosein Ghazian and Seyyed Javad Tabatabai are visiting scholars for Syracuse University focused on teaching sociology.<sup>74</sup>

- Sanctions will continue at the current pace and level of severity as a tangible example of US and international displeasure over Iran's activities. Consensus for these sanctions will wane over time as energy resources become constrained worldwide.
- Iran will maintain control of its population and form of government in the near future. Planners should measure internal reform or even regime change in years, perhaps even decades. Iran has claimed Shia Islam as its official religion since the 16<sup>th</sup> century. It is highly unlikely that a theocratic Iran is going to disappear, much less have a secular government rise in its place anytime soon.

- Iran will continue to build and improve its long-range rocket force, to include the ability to strike increasingly distant targets with more accuracy. This is an area for the US and UN to focus economic sanctions and international cooperation—including from China and Russia. The US should pursue interruption of command and control systems for these forces through non-kinetic means to the fullest extent possible.
- Iran will continue to support proxy terrorist groups as a low-cost power projection capability, so planning for these factors is a priority in case of retaliation against US allies and interests. The United States must seek information operations that emphasize the need for Iranian citizens to denounce terrorism, much as they did in the immediate aftermath of 9/11. Iranians are reasonable in this, and can put pressure on their government to give up terrorist sponsorship, but only if Iranians do not think they are taking such action at the behest of US government influence. Therefore, academic exchanges and student information discussions would be helpful in this endeavor.
- Iran and its citizens will likely perceive as highly escalatory any action construed as regime change. The Iranian population, as a whole, is not overly supportive of the extreme views of their government. They are highly nationalistic peoples and rally to their leaders when confronted overtly by foreign intervention.
- Pre-emption with a military kinetic strike will do more harm than good in the end. The failures of President Bush's administration to make a convincing link between Iraq and WMD possession causes an almost insurmountable litmus test of any future administration to use military force without overt provocation from the adversary.
- The ability to hold targets at risk is necessary to ensure other measures are credible. Therefore, planning towards strikes against nuclear facilities is prudent and beneficial.

- It may seem intuitive, but targets (or means to achieve the desired effects) must consider the end-state desired.<sup>75</sup> In this case, the mutual end-state defined above, without doing harm to the strategic long-term goals.
- Planners must also measure options against set criteria to determine the validity and feasibility of the recommendation—in line with the mutual overlap targeted area. The criteria include: time to result, affront to Iranian prestige and sentiment, scale of secular affront to Islamic values, Iran's retention of military capability, likelihood to strengthen Iranian economic capacity; ability to effect non-proliferation, rewards/encourages peaceful and responsible action. While the following recommendations have associated strengths and weaknesses, implementation of each one provides offsets to the inherent weakness of a single option implemented alone. The best result will likely be a blend of the options.



## Recommendations

*Tie sanctions to a carrot and stick approach that not only focuses on nuclear activities, but other areas.* Analysis of the end states shows that there are areas that America and Iran can work together in, and others that are unacceptable to one another. To move towards the positive goals, and minimize the negative one, the United States should support international offers for open and responsible Iranian nuclear energy development. Ken Pollack highlights that in the 1990s, the United States tried and failed when it pursued a punishment strategy to “coerce Iran into better behavior.”<sup>76</sup> Looking at today’s sanction efforts that have many similar punishment designs, the Iranian people are being even further isolated from the US position. For instance, a Gallup poll in February 2013 showed that Iranian citizen perceptions’ of the sanctions suggests they are not working, at least, not in the Iranian public’s eyes and may even be further strengthening the regime’s support from the Iranian population to develop nuclear weapons. The poll shows that 85 percent of Iranian’s say they are somewhat or very much so feeling the effects of the sanctions; however, 47% of Iranians blame the United States for the impact, as opposed to only 10% who blame the actual Iranian government.<sup>77</sup> The United States will not likely achieve its positive goals by continuing sanctions along these lines.

Therefore, following Pollack’s recommendations, America and its international allies should develop a reward and punishment regime tied to benchmarks that the Iranian government and people could articulate and understand clearly.<sup>78</sup>

*Frame women’s rights as a conservative movement, not a progressive one.* American should shame and highlight oppression of women from a moral, religious view. Iranians would better receive a conservative argument for the equitable treatment of women rather than a liberal argument of women’s rights modeled after modern US standards. The United States cannot

oppose Islamist sentiment with any real credibility, but rather should appeal to equality *through* religion.

*Reach out to university students and academic through internet and cyber info ops.* The United States should ferment capitalistic, democratic sentiment in the student body through a dialogue aimed at the student and professor population. Also, America should emphasize the lack of Iranian jobs, arguing that the Iranian government is failing them, that the people can do better, and deserve a government that serves them. Finally, the United States should make the technology available to enable access to the internet and provide some anonymity to on-line users.

*Demonstrate the ability to hold nuclear targets at risk.* While preventative strikes are not likely, the United States must retain a credible threat against the regime. Combine this with international pressure preventing Iran from acquiring improved strategic air defense capabilities to enable the use of force to remain credible and not overly prohibitive due to casualty aversion.

*Shame the use of terrorist connections, especially the narco-terror connection.* As a deeply religious country, Iran would likely be sensitive to international exposure and shame over two narcotic realities—namely the fact that Iran's population has a fairly serious drug use problem and that the Iranian-sponsored Hezbollah uses narco-trafficking for funding operations.

Iran is struggling with a rising drug epidemic as youth unemployment and a lack of freedoms exacerbate problems. Iranian scholars estimate that over 4 million people use drugs regularly, that drug related incidents account for half of criminal arrests, and 50 to 65 percent of Afghan opiates travel through Iran for export.<sup>79</sup> As for the narco-terrorism connections, investigators estimate that over the last decade or so, Hezbollah raised tens of millions of dollars



through illicit drug activities by operating in South America's tri-border region formed by Paraguay, Brazil, and Argentina.<sup>80</sup>

*Develop anti-swarming capabilities to offset Iranian asymmetric tactics.* Iran's development of fast attack boats and unmanned aerial vehicles that when paired with swarming tactics, produces a significant challenge for the United States. Iran used these tactics to solid effect during the tanker wars of the 1980s, and a US war-game simulation in 2002 resulted in over a dozen US warships sunk because of these tactics.<sup>81</sup> While the US Navy works to minimize the threat, it remains a key area of concern for the United States.



## *Conclusion*

US planners and policymakers should focus shaping actions on the intersection of where US and Iranian end-states show mutual consensus. Shaping the strategic environment requires a flexible and nuanced approach by continuing the use of targeted economic instruments of power and posturing military assets in the region that communicate a capability to resist aggression, to defend against Iranian swarm-tactics, mining, and use of proxies. Furthermore, non-kinetic means such as force posture, information operations as the supported line of operation, and deterrence options that do not undermine Iranian moderate leadership and its population is vital for US success. Regime change might be the ultimate desire for some, but that will only come with time if the US can navigate the US-Iranian relationship in such a way as to diminish Iran's effectiveness in utilizing the information realm. America must also help maintain information flow on the internet to Iranians, champion women's rights and student progress both inside Iran and in the international community, and take limited-to-no overt kinetic action against Iran unless used as only a last resort. These efforts require a concerted effort to counter Iranian propaganda and revolutionary-style rhetoric that Iran's hard-liners continue to rely on in their approach with other nations. To do this, the United States should focus their message on the IRI's record of failures and hypocrisy. Since Iran operates on a revolutionary ideology and framework, the next logical step requires international- and regional-level counter-insurgency operations to advance reform and change in Iran, enabling the US to move beyond the fears of an irresponsible, bellicose nuclear-armed state actor.

## Endnotes

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- <sup>10</sup> Michael Eisenstadt, *The Strategic Culture of the Islamic Republic of Iran*, Middle East Studies Monographs, no. 1 (Marine Corps University, Aug 2011), 7.
- <sup>11</sup> A traditional Political, Military, Economic, Social, Information, and Infrastructure (PMESII) approach is helpful to planners. Much of discussion in this section fits into PMESII. I did not use the PMESII approach since I wanted to explore some key areas that are even more broad and overarching, fitting a strategic culture/political culture category more than a simple PMESII analysis.
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- <sup>14</sup> Mostashari, "Iran, Rogue State?" 2.
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- <sup>16</sup> Jeannie L. Johnson, *Strategic Culture: Refining the Theoretical Construct*, SAIC Report DTRA01-03-D-0017, (Washington, DC: 31 October 2006), 3.
- <sup>17</sup> Ibid.
- <sup>18</sup> Ibid., 11.
- <sup>19</sup> Ray Takeyh, *Guardians of the Revolution: Iran and the World in the Age of the Ayatollahs* (New York, NY: Oxford University Press, 2009), 2.
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- <sup>23</sup> Richard N. Haas, "The Age of Nonpolarity," *Foreign Affairs*, May/June 2008: 1, <http://www.foreignaffairs.com/articles/63397/richard-n-haass/the-age-of-nonpolarity>.
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- <sup>69</sup> Mostashari, "Iran, Rogue State?" 5.
- <sup>70</sup> As a state that depends on cooperation with the majority of states in the international system, the United States has much to lose from aggressive policies. As a continental power, the United States depends less on trade than small countries. Trade makes up one-third of America's GDP, according to the US Department of Commerce's *International Trade Administration's Strategic Plan for FY 2012-2016*.
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## Appendix A: End States Venn Diagram

